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The 'end of organization' and morality.

A short reflexive essay in honour of Professor Peter Groenewegen

By Frans Kamsteeg and Harry Wels

Writing about the end of organizations, Aldrich and Ruef write gloomily: 'From coherence, a disbanding organization sinks back into incoherence and disorganization, and disappears as an evolutionary entity' (2006: 209). If we apply this claim to what the *bureaucratic* organization in the Weberian sense has become, it may make one wonder if the end of organization is indeed the beginning of incoherence; if organization is understood as elevation from the murky swamp of disorganization; if the end of organizations indeed will erase them from history; if once an organization ends it is really erased from the evolutionary memory of how it featured in the world's 'becomings', to use this fashionable Deleuzian term. In this short essay we would like to explain why we completely and utterly disagree with this glorification of (bureaucratic) organizations as our only safeguard from 'incoherence and disorganization' and how the 'end of organization' could rather bring a new moral and intellectual impetus to university life, both for staff and students.

Many employees who have lived and worked long enough in, or who have even made it into retirement from, a bureaucratic organization share this one sentiment after 'the end of organization' and that is freedom. Freedom from bureaucracy, especially in the form of retirement, usually comes with a huge sense of relieve; it may even come with sensations of intellectual liberation. Fair enough, but what's new? We all know this ourselves or have heard these kind of social talk from retired colleagues around us!

What we would like to add is that 'the end of organization' may also result, on top of what is mentioned above, in a renewed *moral* perspective on bureaucratic organizations. To substantiate our argument we will take the retirement of Professor Zygmunt Bauman in 1990 as a case in point. 'It was in his retirement (...) that Bauman really came to life as one of the leading social theorists of the age' (Da Silva 2017: 226). Bauman passed away in 2017, 91 years old and his liberation and retirement from the bureaucratic organization of the University of Leeds where he spent the last 27 years of his life brought us the inspiring concept of 'liquid modernity', that characterises our societies as 'frenzied [and in] restless movement' (ibid). Bauman depicted these liquid times as 'skating on thin ice. The only thing that stops one from falling through into the icy waters below is speed [of consumption]' (ibid). His characterisation of modern times was not value neutral, it came from and with a moral perspective. Together with Leonidas Donskis, Bauman delved into a specific take on morality in their book *Moral blindness* (2013), in which they devote one whole chapter to the 'consumer university'. And for a good reason: Universities in their eyes have become fast moving consumer goods. 'It is academic capitalism without freedom, a species of technocratic and bureaucratic tyranny implemented in the name of freedom and progress (...) a technocratic simulacrum of the free market' (137-138) and '(w)hile a consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the *economy*, it sprinkles sand into the bearings of *morality*' (150, italics in original).

In 2014 we invited both authors to Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to speak about this theme in front of deans and other colleagues, many of which in leadership positions in our university. The analysis and message of Bauman and Donskis was not taken lightly by the audience and responses were generally very defensive, and even orally aggressive. In 2016 Bauman and Donskis published a sequel

to their 2013 book, provokingly entitled 'Liquid evil'. By this time Bauman had become too old to travel, but in May 2016, together with our South African colleague Tammy Shefer from the University of the Western Cape, and Ida Sabelis from our department, we organized a book tour for Leonidas Donskis through South Africa. The reception of Donskis and his moral message about and against liquid evil was overwhelmingly positive. Donskis passed away in September of that same year, only 54 years of age. Bauman passed away a few months later, in January 2017, aged 91. According to them it is necessary for our current bureaucratized academic institutions to end in order to make room for 'the logic of intellectual and creative *slow food*' (137, italics in original), prevent moral blindness and harness ourselves against liquid evil through taking a moral perspective. Retirement is one way of ending the confines and shackles of the bureaucratic organizations our universities have become.

As we have seen with Zygmunt Bauman, the end of an academic career through retirement is certainly not the end of academia. In that sense academia has nothing to fear from Peter's retirement. Although the department will certainly miss Peter's high scientific productivity, perhaps he himself will experience being rid of today's university regime as a perfect opportunity to stand up and argue for a university Bauman-and-Donskis-style. We do consider Peter's fascination with the 'end of organization' (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006) in that context as an appropriate and timely one. In many ways academia is no longer what-it-used-to-be, although most critics spreading this cry of distress may not have Peter's academic age and academic standing to know what exactly is the ideal shape of the university. Yet, nostalgia – or should we follow our colleague Sierk Ybema and write postalgia (Ybema 2004)? – reigns when academics flock together – as they often do – to talk about 'the academic project'.

In his years at our department Peter has been an incessant bringer-of-ideas and a tireless supporter of research and educational initiatives. However, in many a backstage and corridor chat he explained how the organization (be it the department, the faculty, or the university board – or bureaucrats in general) often understood him wrong or simply refused to understand his ideas. We actually think it is this organisation he has in mind when it comes to the 'end of organization'. We are afraid that today's 'wannabe' and 'missionary' universities and academics (Paradeise a.o. 2012) feel invulnerable to what they may well consider to be Don Quichote-like warriors such as Peter. Yet we hope that he will take his retired position to become the energetic champion of morality and critic of the consumer university advocated by Bauman and Donskis (2013). We think there are good chances that Peter in his new position will evolve into such a figure, and in order to inspire him – if this is necessary still – we would recommend him to (re-?)read John Williams' epic novel *Stoner* ([1965] 2003). We can only guess why this book – completely unnoticed at its appearance has become so popular in the Netherlands recently. It is tempting to believe that this is exactly because the book makes a passionate plea for the (academic) craftsmanship that Sennett (2008) maintains requires a re-appreciation of the skills and energy required for really good work so in danger of being discredited in today's world.

[Cover Stoner should come in here]

Although we did not grasp the depth of the book's message when we first saw it in its Dutch translation, we said to each other that it could as well be Peter's autobiography. The cover shows the face of the book's protagonist: an academic amateur – in the literal, positive sense of the word – who

little by little becomes frustrated by the small-minded macro and micro politics that even compromises the most enlightened intellectuals in his environment. Clearly both the cover photo nor the description of the Stoner character are not Peter, but the physical as well as the ideational resemblance and congruency are remarkable. Leaving the physical part aside, we will briefly explore the richness of the novel to inspire and provide him with the ideological weapons to march for the academic organisation as-it-should-be.

Although *Stoner* is most lauded for its empathetic story of a man being misrecognized and belittled in his work, we believe the book teaches some important lessons about ‘the true nature of the University’ (p. 29) and what makes for its quality. This almost metaphysical concept is incredibly hard to define, but nevertheless ‘for all practical purposes [...] really does exist’ as Robert Pirsig argues in that other classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974: 187). Stoner and his academic friends decide to define it as ‘the True, the Good, the Beautiful, just laying around the corner.’ (p. 29). Stoner, whose academic career was sparked by the reading of Shakespearean poetry – we do not know what first made Peter’s academic heart tick – further develops the quality argument suggested by Pirsig (1974: 251) when he tells to one of his students to be out of place at university, because he simply did not produce the correct qualitative response to what an academic environment is expecting of students. Yet, in the book this outcry does not get much response and the tragedy develops quickly; instead of valuing Stoner for defending academic standards and quality, many of his colleagues become his opponents, forcing him to accept the mediocrity of student performance – and their own for that matter. Stoner, however, is not willing to budge an inch and relentlessly keeps questioning his students’ and colleagues’ questionable behaviour.

This quality gatekeeper behaviour turning against him eventually makes him lose the battle. It is, however, difficult to say which is more tragic: Stoner’s retreat and defeat, or the decay and fall of the institution – and its representors – that causes this. Nevertheless, we think there is hope for academia now that this remarkable story of a crushed academic in the depressing environment of a ‘quiet’ American university has become something of a slow-burn sensation. We believe that the story of Stoner falling dedicating himself to the beauty and emotion of the academic endeavour has fallen on fertile ground. The fact that apparently there is a broad audience for this ‘small’ book means that there is still room for quality, beauty, and, by implication, for academia. We hope and trust that Peter is willing to contribute to the end of the organisation and the university’s current ugly face in favour of its academic beauty.

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